

I AM
Remarkable

Literature review

I AM Remarkable

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Introduction

Many organisations are investing in programs to advance diversity. However, women and other social, racial and ethnic minorities in executive roles are still significantly under-represented

Research shows that while women are well represented as middle managers, their numbers drop when making the jump to VP-level executives.¹ As a result, women and minorities only occupy about 31 percent of the board seats of Fortune 500.²

One of the big hurdles women face when tackling this gap is practicing self-promotion - or vocally expressing their achievements in a working environment.³ We believe this issue is also true for other under-represented groups. And it needs addressing. Because the benefits of self-promotion – including taking control of how you're perceived by others, and making them understand the unique contribution you can make – are vast.

How to use this literature review

We've put together this literature review to help you wrap your head around some of the issues you might have to grapple with as a facilitator

You're not expected to be an expert on any of these topics, but understanding the research can help you better guide the conversation and respond to the difficult questions that often arise in a workshop.

As far as possible, we've tried to include flagship studies – those that are seen as the defining research on a given topic and are continuously referenced by other scholars. For that reason, some of the research dates back several decades. But just because it's "old" doesn't mean it's irrelevant. If you want to learn more about how the research is still being discussed and applied today, we recommend you look at some of the pieces in the further reading section, which are (with one exception) from 2012 onwards.

This literature review is structured into layers: the top layer, the research at a glance, gives you the "elevator pitch" for each topic. In most workshops, this is all you'll need. But sometimes participants have questions and want to dig into the research we're sharing. The research in detail should help with that. Where possible, we've linked through to publicly available versions of the research, but we've also summed up the findings of each study. The further reading section is made up of non-academic pieces, which are useful to get a more contextually relevant understanding of the research.

Happy reading. If you'd like to share feedback, email us at iar@google.com

The Research

Modesty norms and the backlash effect

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Academics use the term feminine modesty effect to refer to social norms that dictate women should behave in a certain way. “A modest individual is often seen as soft-spoken and meek,” Mary E. Wade wrote in [2001 research](#). “More important, however, a modest person is selfless. The norms of modesty and selflessness may channel women’s influence attempts into advocacy for others rather than for the self.” In layman’s terms? Society expects women to celebrate other people’s achievements, but not their own.

When they violate these norms, women face what academics refer to as a backlash effect. In [one of the first pieces of research](#) on this topic, Laurie A. Rudman described this backlash as “social and economic sanctions for counter-stereotypical behaviour.” To avoid the backlash, [more recent research](#) has found women stop engaging in the counter-stereotypical behavior. In other words, they stop self-promoting.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

Self-promotion as a risk factor for women: The costs and benefits of counter stereotypical impression management (1998)

It may be two decades old now, but this research from Laurie A. Rudman is still seen as one of the definitive studies when it comes to the backlash effect. It was one of the first papers to explain in detail the Catch-22 situation women face: to be successful, they need to make their achievements known, but when they talk about them, they face a backlash. “Self-promotion may be instrumental for managing a competent impression, yet women who self-promote may suffer social reprisals for violating gender prescriptions to be modest.”

The research found that both women and men consider self-promoting women to be less competent, less socially attractive, and subsequently less hireable than self-promoting men. It also found that gender modesty norms are often more strongly defended by women than by men.

Disruptions in women’s self-promotion: The backlash avoidance model (2010)

If Rudman’s 1998 research identified the concept of the backlash effect, her follow-up research, which came a decade later, and was done in collaboration with Corinne A. Moss-Racusin, looked closer at how it affected women’s ability and likelihood to self-promote. The researchers asked participants to take part in a job interview and write a graduate school application essay.

One group was made up of women advocating on their own behalf, and another group was made up of women advocating on behalf of other women. The first group (the self-promoting women) were less successful than either the self-promoting men or the other-promoting women, suggesting that a fear of a backlash was holding them back.

The researchers concluded that this backlash – which led to women self-censoring and avoiding speaking out about their achievements – could be partly to blame for women’s lack of advancement at work. “The double standard for self-promotion is a critical barrier to women’s equitable treatment because self-promotion is necessary for career advancement, yet only women risk penalties for it.”

FURTHER READING

[For women leaders, likability and success hardly go hand-in-hand](#), Harvard Business Review

[A lack of confidence isn’t what’s holding back working women](#), The Atlantic

Cultural constraints

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

While modesty norms can prevent women from talking about their achievements, there are other reasons why people might not feel comfortable self-promoting. **Cultural barriers**, for example, can play a big part. In fact, [researchers have found](#) that “personal branding, or self-promotion, is one of six major areas of cultural difference that cause discomfort for people around the world.”

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

[Cross-cultural differences in self-promotion: A study of self-citations in management journals](#) (2016)

Back in 2013, [the Economist](#) found that male academics were more likely than their female peers to cite their own research. But five years later, researchers at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven decided to throw another variable into the mix: culture. They found that authors from Western, individualistic cultures, like the US, were more likely to cite their own work than those from Eastern, collectivist cultures. In fact, they found that culture played a stronger role than gender. “Of those authors living in countries with an individualist culture, 13% use many self-citations, as opposed to just 7% of those authors from countries with a collectivist culture. This gap is substantially wider than the gap in self-citations between male authors (13%) and female authors (10%),” the researchers concluded.

FURTHER READING

[Self-promotion for professionals from countries where bragging is bad](#), Harvard Business Review

[How to adapt to American-style self-promotion](#), Harvard Business Review

Imposter's syndrome

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Cultural and gender modesty norms can deter people from self-promoting, even if they are themselves aware of their achievements and have no issues with self-esteem. Imposter's syndrome has an even more pernicious effect: it prevents people from seeing their remarkable attributes and makes them think nothing they do is good enough.

Unlike gender modesty norms, imposter's syndrome can affect literally anyone, even people who, by all objective standards, are incredibly successful and accomplished. For example, Pulitzer-prize-winning novelist Maya Angelou spoke about experiencing imposter's syndrome. While imposter's syndrome knows no gender, racial, or ethnic barriers, new research suggests that it has a graver effect on some minority groups.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

The imposter phenomenon in high-achieving women: dynamics and therapeutic intervention (1978)

This research, which focused on high-achieving women in an academic context, was the first to define a feeling that many people have experienced – a sense that in spite of all our accomplishments, we're just not good enough.

"Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise." Someone could have all the academic credentials under the sun, but if they're affected by imposter's syndrome, they'll "find innumerable means of negating any external evidence that contradicts their belief that they are, in reality, unintelligent."

An examination of the impact of minority status stress and impostor feelings on the mental health of diverse ethnic minority college students (2013)

While the original research into imposter's syndrome focused specifically on women, more recent research has looked at how it affects different minority groups. In this study, the authors surveyed 332 minority (black, Latinx and Asian) undergraduate students to learn more about how competent they felt, how much discrimination they experienced, and whether and how often they experienced anxiety. As Inside Higher Ed explained in a write-up of the research, "black students who dealt with significant 'impostorism' also reported higher levels of anxiety, as well as depression related to discrimination they perceived."

FURTHER READING

[Learning to deal with the impostor syndrome](#), New York Times

[Dealing with impostor syndrome when you're treated as an impostor](#), New York Times

[It's probably an appropriate time to learn about the impostor phenomenon](#), Motherboard

[Imposter syndrome](#), Stonewall

Stereotype threat

THE RESEARCH AT GLANCE

We've seen how modesty norms can prevent women from speaking out about their accomplishments. We've also seen how imposter's syndrome – which can affect anyone, regardless of their gender – stops people from understanding how remarkable their accomplishments are.

Stereotype threat – a situation where someone is worried about conforming to a negative stereotype about their social group – is even more harmful, because research suggests it can actually affect our performance. As an [NPR piece](#) on the topic summarized, “when there's a stereotype in the air and people are worried they might confirm the stereotype by performing poorly, their fears can inadvertently make the stereotype become self-fulfilling.”

Just as with imposter's syndrome, it's not only women who are affected by stereotype threat. “It is a predicament that can beset the members of any group about whom negative stereotypes exist,” [explain the researchers](#) who first coined the term.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

[Stereotype threat and the intellectual performance of African Americans](#) (1995)

The first piece of research on the topic defines stereotype threat as “being at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group.” For this study, the academics decided to explore the effect of the (unsubstantiated) stereotype that black people are less academically able than their white peers. The researchers went in with the following hypothesis: if a group of black students were told the tests they were about to take were “diagnostic of ability” (i.e. would show how much or little intellect they had), they would worry about conforming to negative stereotypes. This, the researchers hypothesized, would negatively affect their performance on the test.

Over four studies, the researchers tested their hypothesis. For example, in some cases, one group of black students was told the tests were diagnostic of ability and another wasn't. The former group – in other words, the individuals who were more likely to be affected by stereotype threat – underperformed against their peers in the latter group.

Stereotype threat, “can be disruptive enough to impair intellectual performance,” the academics concluded.

Stereotype threat and women’s math performance (1998)

Three years after the first piece of research into stereotype threat, academics decided to explore another stereotype: the (false) idea that men are better than women at math.

Researchers divided female participants into two groups and tested their hypothesis over three experiments. For example, in one study, the female participants were asked to take a math test. Ahead of the test, one group was reminded of the stereotype that women are weaker at math than men; the other group was not. “When the test was described as producing gender differences and stereotype threat was high, women performed substantially worse than equally qualified men did,” the researchers found. In other words, simply the fear of conforming to the stereotype that women are bad at math made participants under-perform in the test.

FURTHER READING

It’s not me, it’s you, New York Times

Thin ice: Stereotype threat and black college students, The Atlantic

Unconscious biases

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Most people like to think they’re fully in control of their feelings and the way they act towards others. But 1995 research suggests otherwise: “Considerable evidence now supports the view that social behavior often operates in an implicit or unconscious fashion. The identifying feature of implicit cognition is that past experience influences judgment in a fashion not introspectively known by the actor.” In plain English? When we’re in unfamiliar situations and are required to make quick assessments of people, we (without realizing) tend to draw on pre-existing stereotypes.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination (2004)

What’s in a name? A lot, apparently. In 2004 research, two professors carried out an experiment that one of them recounted in a 2015 New York Times article: “We mailed thousands of résumés to employers with job openings and measured which ones were selected for callbacks for interviews. But before sending them, we randomly used stereotypically African-American names (such as ‘Jamal’) on some and stereotypically white names (like ‘Brendan’) on others.

The same résumé was roughly 50% more likely to result in callback for an interview if it had a 'white' name. Because the résumés were statistically identical, any differences in outcomes could be attributed only to the factor we manipulated: the names."

Investors prefer entrepreneurial ventures pitched by attractive men (2014)

Two entrepreneurs present their pitches to potential investors. The content of those pitches is exactly the same. The only difference is the gender of the presenters: one is a man, the other is a woman. In theory, both of them should stand an equal chance of landing the investment, right? And yet researchers have found that's not the case, because of the unconscious biases people have of female entrepreneurs. "The results of the three studies document a profound and consistent gender gap in entrepreneur persuasiveness. Both professional investors and non-professional evaluators preferred pitches presented by male entrepreneurs compared with pitches made by female entrepreneurs, even when the content of the pitch was the same."

What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching (2015)

If you asked someone to give you feedback on your performance at work, you'd hope they would focus on things that have some substance – how well you prepared for a task or your technical know-how, for example. But researchers looking at how students rate their teachers have found this isn't the case, and unconscious biases influence the assessments. "In our experiment, assistant instructors in an online class each operated under two different gender identities. Students rated the male identity significantly higher than the female identity, regardless of the instructor's actual gender, demonstrating gender bias."

FURTHER READING

Unconscious bias: What is it and can it be eliminated? The Guardian

Implicit bias: Is everyone racist? BBC

The case for diversity

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Diverse organizations – that is to say, organizations that accurately reflect the customers they serve and the communities in which they operate, at all levels of seniority – have an edge over their more homogenous counterparts. Researchers have found that diverse organizations are more profitable, more innovative and less accepting of the status quo. Surveys have also shown that young job seekers increasingly consider how diverse and inclusive a company is before applying, suggesting diverse companies might find it easier to attract top talent.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

Delivering through diversity (2018)

For many years now, McKinsey has carried out annual research looking at the issue of diversity in the workplace (mainly drawing on data from US and UK companies). The latest edition confirms what all the others have found: there is a statistically significant correlation between more diverse leadership teams and financial out-performance.

The researchers found that companies in the top-quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21% more likely to outperform on profitability. They also found that companies in the top-quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity on executive teams were 33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability.

Gender diversity and corporate performance (2012)

While the McKinsey reports mainly draw on US and UK data, this study from Credit Suisse takes a more global approach. The findings, though, were very similar: gender diversity could help the bottom line. “Companies with at least one woman on the board have outperformed in terms of share price performance those with no women on the board over the course of the past six years. Companies with at least one woman on the board also exhibit higher return on equity, lower leverage and higher valuations.”

FURTHER READING

How and where diversity drives financial performance, Harvard Business Review

Why diverse teams are smarter, Harvard Business Review

Importance of self-promotion

THE RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Self-promotion – the act of making people aware of your skills and achievements – can make a lot of people feel uncomfortable. But research suggests that it’s absolutely crucial to succeeding at work. For example, academics have found that in job interviews, applicants who talk openly and confidently about their achievements are considered more competent than more modest interviewees (even in countries where self-promotion is frowned upon!).

Researchers have also found that, contrary to what we might like to think, good work doesn’t speak for itself. For example, in 2005, researchers found that in team collaborations where it was unclear who contributed what, women were less likely than their male peers to receive credit for the work they did.

The lesson? If we want to be recognized for the work we do and advance in our careers, we have to fight through the discomfort and learn how to self-promote.

THE RESEARCH IN DETAIL

Political skill in organizations (2007)

We might like to think our accomplishments speak for themselves, and that if we put our head down and do a good job, our efforts and achievements will be recognized. But in the modern workplace, where we operate in teams and are given a lot of autonomy, that's rarely the case. As researchers have found, those who succeed at work do so not just because they are intelligent and hard-working, but because they go out of their way to make sure the right people are aware of this. "Although performance, effectiveness, and career success are determined in part by intelligence and hard work, other factors, such as social astuteness, positioning, and savvy, also play important roles."

The Effects of Applicant Impression Management Tactics on Interviewer Judgements (1989) and Differential Effectiveness of Applicant Impression Management Tactics on Employment Interview Decisions (1992)

Have you ever sat in an interview telling someone about your past accomplishments and noticed that you keep saying "we" rather than "I"? Of course, you don't want to come across as self-centred by taking credit for all of your team's and company's successes. But unless you take ownership of your achievements, you might end up losing out to another candidate. That's because researchers have consistently found that interviewers are more likely to hire candidates who emphasize their positive traits and claim responsibility for accomplishments.

No Credit Where Credit Is Due: Attributional Rationalization of Women's Success In Male-Female Teams (2005)

Researchers at New York University asked subjects to assess how a group of men and women performed on a joint task. The academics found that, unless they explicitly provided information about the women's excellent contributions or strong past performance, the subjects deemed the women to be less competent, less influential, and less likely to have played a leadership role than their male peers, regardless of their actual contribution.

It Had to Be You (Not Me)! Women's Attributional Rationalization of Their Contribution to Successful Joint Work Outcomes (2013)

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts and New York University set out to test the idea that women are less likely to take credit for their achievements and contributions in collaborative contexts. They found that in mixed-sex groups, women gave more credit to their male teammates and took less credit themselves, unless their contribution to the outcome was irrefutably clear or they were explicitly told how well they had performed as individuals.

The same dynamics did not play out in women-only groups. As the researchers concluded, "Unless individual contribution is clear and unambiguous, women do not credit themselves for their accomplishments when working with men. This denial of responsibility for successful outcomes is likely to compound the many obstacles women face in the workplace."

FURTHER READING

How To Talk About Your Skills Without Sounding Like A Show-Off, Fast Company

How to Talk About Your Accomplishments Without Sounding Braggy and Annoying, The Muse

Still have questions?

Please contact us via [LinkedIn](#) or at iar@google.com

